

## **Medstar: Intermezzo**

By Michael Reeves and Steve Perry; Illustrations by Randy Martinez

Jos pried a shard of sharp and jagged durasteel half as wide as his hand from the belly of the wounded trooper and dropped it into the tray Tolk was holding out. It didn't clank when it hit -- somebody had gotten tired of hearing that particular noise over and over again, and had lined the metal trays with old sheets of thick and rubbery transponder insulation. Now, when a surgeon pulled shrapnel from a patient and dropped it in the dish, the sound was muffled, a soft thump of little consequence.

*Not a bad idea*, Jos thought. Of course, the new sound irritated him just as much as the old one had. More, maybe. But then, a lot of things irritated Jos these days. Having to stand there for hours on end and pull chunks of razored metal from charred and scrambled organs was high on that list. It made padding surgical trays to soften the clatter seem fairly pointless.

*You sure you want to go there, Jos?* his inner voice asked. *You sure you want to think about the pointlessness of things?*

No. He didn't.

Like it made much of a difference what he wanted.

The air coolers were offline again, due to spore-rot: nothing unusual there. The damp tropical heat seeped into the OT, turning the air sodden, raising sweat and not allowing it to evaporate. The smell of mold was omnipresent, easily overwhelming the ozone tang of the antiseptis fields as well as the more unpleasant chemical scent of the herbicide they periodically coated on the walls. The spore infestation had been particularly bad since the move from the Jasserak lowlands to the highlands. Everyone was wearing microfilter masks and protective goggles, whether outside or inside. It wasn't paranoia; three humans, a Kubaz, and an Ugnaught were in the infirmary right now being treated for ascomycetous pneumoconiosis. Jos had seen sentients of those species, and others as well, suffering from end-stage fester lung as it was commonly known. It wasn't pretty. Some spiked fevers high enough to literally cook in their own juices.

And the highland area was considered one of the garden spots of the planet.

Jos clamped off a couple of small bleeders and had Tolk sponge the wound. He looked at it with a critical eye. Good enough. The droid could gluestat this one shut, and if the clone trooper didn't get fester lung, spleen-rot, or some other kind of infection from the blasted spores in the next 24 hours, he'd probably survive to fight another day.

"Give him to the droid to close," Jos told Tolk. He sighed. "And tell our next guest his table's ready."

The operating theater was makeshift, even more so than usual, since it had only just been set up. Rimsoos were designed to relocate in a hurry -- hence the "mobile" in Republic Mobile Surgical Unit -- but they'd only pulled up stakes and moved once since Jos had been on this overcooked world, and that had been less than a week ago. It had seemed the prudent thing to do, given that the Separatists were mounting a major offensive to push the Republic front lines back, tossing mortars, zapping them with lasers and particle beams, and generally blowing the mopek out of the place. The relocation had gone by the book, according to the official report, with a minimum loss of equipment, patients, and personnel.

Of course, one of the casualties had happened to be Jos' closest friend.

Jos blew out another sigh. It had been almost fifteen minutes since he'd thought about Zan. *Must be a new record.*

Zan Yant, a Zabrak from the world of Talus, had been a surgeon and an accomplished musician as well as Jos' cube-mate, and a more sympatico soul one could not have asked for. Now Zan was dead -- collateral damage in a war that he'd hated, with a passion that seemed reserved for those of artistic temperament. Zan Yant, scion of a wealthy mercantile family, a composer of classical etudes, sonatas, conserlistas, and other works of musical genius, was dead, and there was no sense to it, no purpose, and no excuse.

He hadn't suffered; there was that consolation, at least. A sliver of shrapnel, thinner than a bantha hair, had lodged in the Zabrak's anterior ganglion node, at the base of his skull, shutting him down instantly. It had been -- so everyone said -- analagous to flicking off the master switch on the back of a protocol droid's neck. That quick and painless. The crucial difference being, of course, that one could always power up a droid again.

A pair of clone troopers, pressed into service as orderlies, wheeled in the next patient. This kind of scut work should have been done by programmed droids but some kind of rust or smut had attacked the seals on many of the mechanicals, and as a result, more than half of them were out of service.

It was an insane situation. He was the Chief Surgeon, after all, and a Captain, the second in command after Colonel D'Arc Vaetes. He wasn't supposed to be elbow-deep in the purplish guts of clone troopers, pulling out scrap metal and staunching bleeders. But the conditions on this world had set the clock back a few millennia, and they now worked shorthanded, under primitive conditions that all too often meted out death instead of renewed life for whoever was under their laser scalpels.



Tolk la Trene, his scrub nurse, looked at the flatscreen report on the next injured clone. "Particle burns, compression injuries, according to the field medic." She rattled off the blood pressure, respiration, and heart rate as Jos nodded absently. All he wanted to do was crawl into his kiosk and sleep -- for a week, a month, however long it took for this blasted war to be over. It was too much effort to think, to remember, to even breathe, much less to do surgery. But there was no choice.

"Get him on fluids," he told the other nurse. He turned to Tolk. "How long can we keep him in the bacta tank?"

"Forty-five minutes, tops."

It wasn't enough, Jos knew. And partial treatment of the bullae and necrotic tissue could be worse than no immersion, since it would raise the risk of infection. "Prep him for maser debriding." *And wave a few charms over him and chant, while you're at it.*

He was so tired and depressed that even the presence of his beloved Tolk, normally more than enough to raise his spirits under the most adverse conditions, failed to cheer him now.

They'd only recently reconciled their differences in the wake of Zan's death, and he felt he should be the happiest lifeform in the galaxy. Instead, he felt a welter of conflicting emotions, not the least of which was guilt for being alive and in love.

He knew he had to go through this. Grief was a process that couldn't be rushed or refused. And Tolk understood. In addition to being a nurse, she was also a Lorradian; her ability to read the body language of others bordered on telepathy. She knew he needed space -- more than anything else right now.

Behind him, shrouded inside a hooded and concealing robe, stood one of The Silent, that mysterious siblinghood whose very presence somehow seemed to help patients recuperate. No one understood if the effect was panacea or placebo, but no one could deny it was real.

*Whatever you're using on them, Jos thought, save a little for me.*

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They'd finally gotten some semblance of a cantina up again, and Den Dhur, ace HoloNet reporter, had been second in line when the doors had opened. He would have been first, but, being a Sullustan, his short height and weight had kept him from bulling past the larger Bothan ahead of him.

Fortunately. Bothans tended to drink the simple stuff, bottled ales and the like, so Baloob, the Ortolan tender, would get to him fast enough. That first drink was the important one; you needed to get that one fast.

Den saw Doc Vondar a few places behind him, which wasn't exactly a surprise. The cantina had been Jos' second home of late; if he wasn't in the OT pumping fluids into some patient, he was at a table in the dimly lit pub pumping fluids into himself. And who could blame him? His best buddy, the Zabrak surgeon Zan Yant, was only a few days gone. Den wasn't human, but emotions such as grief and loss were pretty much universal. You couldn't be sentient and not feel them.

"Bantha Blaster, right?" the Ortolan asked. He wiped his sweating blue forehead with a bar towel gripped in his stubby trunk.



"Absolutely. And soon as you can see my face through the glass, set up another one."

"No problem. Don't want to have to look at your face any more than necessary," Baloob said. He started building the drink as Den headed for a small and still empty table. He beckoned to Jos on the way.

"Hey, Doc. Over here."

Jos looked at Den as if he had never seen him before but he turned and started toward him. He moved like an undead creature in a horror holo. Poor human. This was his first war, and Zan Yant had been the first real friend he'd lost to it. Den realized with something of a shock that he couldn't even remember back to his first war and the first friend he'd seen killed -- they all just blurred together into one long sense-memory of blood and chaos.

A droid server walked past. Den waved at it, got its attention. "Tell Big Nose to make another Blaster for my friend." He nodded at the approaching Jos.

"Certainly, sir," the droid said, and headed for the bar.

Den settled back and sipped his drink. He wasn't a doctor, but he knew what to prescribe in this particular case.

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Barriss Offee walked into the cantina. She didn't really want a drink, and, as a Jedi Padawan, she wasn't supposed to imbibe anyway. It wasn't an interdiction, but the Council did frown on the younger members of the order getting soused. Barriss had ignored that guideline a few times; the last time had been a week ago, when Zan Yant had been killed. She'd had several mugs of ale, more to commiserate with Jos, Den, and the others than to help her cope with the tragedy. The Force was always there with her to aid her in dealing with such things.

She was also tired from her rotation in the medical ward, and sometimes being around other people helped her wind down a bit. While her training as a potential Jedi Knight gave her reserves that most beings were denied access to, still, taking care of the wounded and the dying for a full shift was exhausting, even with the Force's help.

Barriss still wondered why Master Luminara Unduli had sent her here to Drongar. The galaxy needed Jedi Knights far more than doctors in the series of galactic struggles that had come to be known as the Clone Wars. Even though she wasn't technically a knight, having yet to complete her training, still she could not help but feel that her talents were being wasted here. After all, had she not helped defeat Dooku's forces in the arena on Geonosis? Had she not fought side-by-side with the legendary Kenobi and Skywalker on Ansion, and been instrumental in brokering a peace treaty there? Try as she might to accept her Master's decision with humility and grace, and as ennobling as the work of healing was, she still sometimes chafed under the yoke of her assignment here.

She saw the reporter Den Dhur and Captain Vondar sitting together, saw the little Sullustan wave at her. She smiled in response.

"Good evening, Jedi Offee," came a voice from behind her. She turned to see protocol droid I-5YQ entering the cantina behind her.

"I-Five. How are you?" It seemed strange to be asking a droid about its health, but then, I-Five was a singular droid on many levels. Most folk found it difficult, after more than a few minutes of conversation, to think of the unit as an "it"; the proper pronoun in I-Five's case was definitely "he". The personality contained within that positronic brain was far too individual to be sexless.

"No substantial changes to report," he told her. "I'm still working on completing my memory restoration."

"Any progress?"

He gave a remarkably human-like shrug. "Nothing to narrowcast home about. I was hoping to discover that I'm the deposed ruler of M4-78, but so far, no such luck."

Barriss smiled. M4-78 was the legendary planet of droids, supposedly dating back from the Old Republic. I-Five's sense of humor -- just the fact that a droid could have a sense of humor -- still surprised her at times.

She gestured at the table. "Care to join us?"

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"Anybody seen Klo lately?" Den asked the table at large. Normally they would be playing sabacc, but everybody was too tired to concentrate.

Tolk walked up in time to hear the question. "He's swamped," she said. "Got a lot of unhappy and distressed patients."

"Imagine that," Jos said, being careful not to slur his words. He'd followed the Blaster with a couple of Coruscant Coolers, and was fairly drunk but didn't want to let on how far down that road he was. He noticed Den looking at him. "What?" he asked, and was surprised at how querulous he sounded.

"Have you talked to him yet?"

"Who?"

"Who?" Den mimicked, not unkindly. "Merit. Klo Merit. Big guy, Equani, remember? Our resident Minder, the guy who patches up psyches like you patch up bodies?"

"Me?" Jos said. "No." He shook his head. "No." He noticed the expression on Tolk's face and knew what she wanted to say, because she had said it three or four times already: *Go see the empath. Let him help you with this. That's his job, that's what he does.*

But he didn't want help with it. True, it hurt but it *should* hurt. That's why he'd refused Barriss' offer to grant him balm through the Force as well. His friend was dead, and that wasn't something a man could or should just shrug off and leave behind.

It wasn't like his death even made much sense. Zan had died for a *plant*. The Republic clone army was here on Drongor fighting a war against the Separatist droid forces for one reason only: bota -- a rare plant that could be

turned into a panacean drug that was many things to many species. It could be used variously as an antibiotic, an antipyretic, a narcotic, or a soporific, depending on the life form being treated. The list was long, and it kept growing longer the more the Republic scientists experimented with various permutations of it. It seemed to have few, if any, side effects. It was truly a miracle drug; yet bota's cellular structure was so fragile that any vibration heavier than the treads on a harvester droid could kill it. That usually kept the warring factions from throwing anything that made too big a boom at each other -- but not always.

Bota grew wild in the swamps of the southern continent of Tanlassa, and both the Republic and the Separatists wanted as much of it as they could get. It had no specific benefits for mechanicals, but Count Dooku's forces weren't all droids; there were plenty of biological beings who could use what the plant provided.

The ultimate irony was that its seemingly endless list of miracle cures was interdicted for use on Drongar. Jos and the other doctors were forbidden to use bota to help the very troops who fought to protect it; it was conserved for use in more important battles on other worlds. Zan had fought against this, had gone so far as to illegally treat various patients with a distillate of it. A pity that what had laid him low had been one of the few things the phenomenal plant couldn't cure.

Jos' reverie was interrupted by an all-too-familiar sound, rising in the distance. He looked up and saw that the others were hearing it as well. The drone penetrated the noisy cantina, a sound that everybody knew and everybody hated: medlifters.

"Showtime," Jos said as he finished his drink.

He headed out of the cantina, pulling on a filter mask as the sweltering air of the Drongaran midday wrapped around him like a rontu's tongue. Barriss and Tolk followed. He noticed Leemoth and a few other surgeons approaching from their kiosks. Everyone's path converged on the landing platform, which also served as the triage area. The first of the carriers was settling in, its repulsorlift beams kicking up dust and spores, and Jos could see already that it was going to be a bad one.

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Colonel Vaetes grabbed Jos as he was gowning and gloving up. "Table six is yours," he said. "And you better hurry."

Jos didn't question his boss. After all, it didn't matter. Cut, glue, staple, stitch, one clone was the same as the next. It didn't mean anything, yea or nay -- sewn one, sewn them all.

But when he reached the table and looked at the patient, he got a rush so cold it felt as if he'd been dipped in cryo.

*Zan!*

Then, as he drew nearer, he realized his mistake. Yes, the patient was a Zabrak male, but the tattoos were different, the horn growth not in the same pattern. It was an easy mistake to make, given his thoughts lately.

His rush of excitement plunged. Of course it wasn't Zan. He had seen Zan's body. Dead was forever.

Tolk was laying out instruments, and the circulating nurse was setting up tractor and pressor generators and sterile field lamps as he stepped up. "I didn't know we had any more Zabrats dirtside," he said.

"We don't," Tolk said. "He's a Separatist mercenary. Got shot down behind our lines."

He hadn't had occasion to work on any since Zan's death, however. A quick surge of anger washed over him. "Let somebody else do this one," he said.

Vaetes once again zeroed in on Jos. "No can do. You're the expert on Zabrak anatomy, Jos. MagnoRez scan shows a small-arms slug against his CNS sub-sternal plex, a fragment of another in his twelfth circumcollar nerve, and a few other bits of metal here and there. We've got him on imobilin."

"Great," Jos said, remembering his days working as a surgical resident at Big Zoo. He'd had a run on Zabrak patients, after a visiting contingent's transport had crashed. He'd assisted on more than forty surgeries in five days. "It'll be tricky. We jiggle the plex even a little, he goes into systemic shock and dies. Distress CC-12, he lives, but he's meat from the neck down." That was why they were running imobilin, a paralytic, through him; any movements, however small, could be disastrous.

As he spoke, Jos heard the sound of another medlifter dopplering in. "Then best you get started," Vaetes said in reply. "We'll be needing the table. Soon."

"Colonel--" Jos began.

"I know. He's an enemy combatant and you aren't too fond of them right now. But he's also a high-ranking officer, and RI wants him alive and talking."

"Republic Intelligence -- an oxymoron if ever there was one -- is not my worry."

"No, but surgery is. He's your patient -- take care of him, Doctor Vondar."

*Maker's eyes*, Jos thought. He stepped into the sterile field, blinking as the antipathogen lights strobed over him. "Scan?"

Tolk nodded at the circulating nurse, who held up the flatscreen with the image of the wounded Zabrak's anatomy on it.

Those drinks were coming' hack to haunt Jos. It was too late now for a shot of anti-hangover juice. Even sober, relaxed, and rested this sort of thing was tricky neurosurgery, and he was half drunk, tense, and exhausted. He wouldn't bet a decided against title to a luxury star cruiser on this guy's chances of surviving.

"A human?" came a deep and guttural voice. "They couldn't find a *real* doctor?"

The Zabrak was apparently still awake.

"Who's doing anesthesia?" Jos asked. "Why is this patient talking?"

"Haven't even started slicing me and already you've fouled up, eh. human? Big surprise, that one."

Jos ground enamel. "Somebody put this patient to sleep, please. Now."

"What's the matter?" the Zabrak asked. "Don't have the nodes to kill me while I look you in the eye?"

Jos glared at the wounded patient. "You think it's a bright idea to piss off the surgeon who's about to carve you open like a Feast Day trikaloo?"

The Zabrak sneered. A lot of people might not have recognized the expression, but Jos had lived with Zan for months, and he knew. "Go ahead and cut something fatal, human. You'll be doing me a favor. If I make it, your brain-benders will squeeze me like a sea sponge for what I know. Quick death or slow torture -- which would you choose?"

"We don't torture prisoners."

The Zabrak laughed. It hurt him to do so, Jos could tell. *Good*, he thought, and was surprised at the fierce pleasure he felt.

"Don't get out much, do you?" the Zabrak asked.

Jos concentrated on his breathing. *Don't let him get to you*. "What is your name, Zabrak?"

"What do you care, human?"

"Just curious. After all, I'm going to be cutting you open in a few minutes. I'm Doctor Jos Vondar, by the way."

"Planning to read my epitaph?"

Jos couldn't help it. "Maybe, if I'm lucky."

The Zabrak managed another laugh, again at some cost. "Sar Omant," he said. "Actually, that's *Colonel* Sar Omant, of the Freelance Mercenary Corps. At your service -- unfortunately."

The anesthetist showed up at last and slapped a dermpatch on Colonel Omant's neck. "Sorry. Doctor Vondar," she said. "I had to find enough sodium phyleol for his weight."

Jos nodded. Of course. A Zabrak's physiology required a special anesthetic. Wouldn't be a lot of it lying around.

The Zabrak's eyes started to roll back, showing the whites. Before he lost consciousness, he managed a few more words: "*loz noy jitat....*"

Tolk asked, "What was that? A prayer?"

Jos gritted his teeth again. "No. A curse."

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Going in, Jos realized that he was going to have to do the surgery in two parts. The CC-12 was the easier of the two procedures, insofar that it would only take an hour at most to pull it off. The sub-sternal plex could wait -- it wouldn't kill the Zabrak as long as he was immobilized. Jos could dig the first fragment out, and, if he didn't further damage the circumcollar nerve, the patient would be able to walk -- assuming he didn't die during the second procedure.

It would be so easy to mess it up. Even the best blademaker at Coruscant Medical might not be able to remove a thumb-tip-sized projectile from an area as sensitive as a Zabrak's plex without putting the patient into systemic shock. Nobody would be able to point a finger at Jos if Sar Omant didn't make it. *Just give it a little jerk when you pull it out, twitch it just a hair....*

Or he could insult the CC-12 a little and paralyze the bastard. Save his life but leave him a quad -- it was tempting, very tempting. After all, Zan was dead because of killers like this one. Omant would have plenty of time to think about his actions that way. And at least there would be some justice.

"Number eighteen vibroblade, please."

She slapped the scalpel's handle into his gloved hand. As she did so, the lights blinked off and then back on.

"What?" Jos said, as he pulled his hand away from the patient's horned breastplate.

"It's the generator," somebody said. "Spore-rot eating the harmonic plates, probably."

*Is anyone really surprised?* Jos wondered. They'd had to get the OT and environs up and running before all the generators were in place, and consequently everything was constantly on the verge of overload. Including the personnel -- especially the personnel.

The anesthetist said to him, "We're getting some tamponade in the secondary pericardium, doctor. MEG shows a fluid build-up in the sub-heart."

*Blast!* Jos thought. "We'll have to drain that before we pull the slug." Zabraks had two hearts, a primary and a secondary, and if one began beating out of sync with the other, the arrhythmia could cause both to begin fibrillating. And that would most likely kill Omant before the plex shock got a chance to.

"Crack open a cardiac tray." Jos said. As Tolk turned to get one, he looked around the large room. All the operating tables were full. He could see droid orderlies, including I-Five, pushing more gurneys past the OT's clear denscrist doors in the hall. And even as he realized with a sinking heart how far behind they were dropping, he heard the rising whine of more medlifters approaching.

This was taking far too long. How many of the clones would die while he was working on this enemy soldier?

\* \* \*

Den Dhur had remained in the cantina after the others had left. Mama Dhur hadn't raised no crazy younglings, and crazy was what you had to be to go out into the blazing miasmic afternoon sun if you didn't have to. So Den's plan for the rest of the day was a simple one -- he would do his best to single-throatedly keep the cantina in business.

The whir of a servodriver near the rear of the building made him glance around. A construction droid was putting the finishing touches on one of the rear panels. The OT was up and running, Den knew, plus whatever support infrastructure it needed -- and the cantina, of course. But the rest of the base was only now, after nearly a week, coming online. He was grateful that the cantina had been the next to be erected, after the Rimsoo buildings. Someone had their priorities straight.

Even so, however, Den -- and others he'd talked to -- still felt a definite sense of hanging fire. As if they were all waiting for someone or something to give them the go-ahead with the rest of their lives, or at least the rest of their tours on Drongar. There was a musical term Zan had used a lot -- Den frowned, searching for the word.

*Intermezzo.* A short and simple piece, bridging two separate works. Though often disparaged as little more than "lift-tube music," it could sometimes be, according to the Zabrak composer, extremely important. "Like connective tissue," he'd told Den. "It holds everything else in place."

"He looked about at the rest of the patrons. There were seven or eight other beings who were mostly human, but not all. The Bothan who'd crowded ahead of him earlier was still here, staring broodingly into his mug. Closer to the entrance an Ishi Tib seemed to be flirting with an Ugnaught. Den shuddered slightly. *Yar, bloodline, there's a match be made on Planet Hell.* He looked hastily someplace else, and spotted a Durosian medtech just entering. Something about her made Den's story sense tingle. He picked up his drink and went to join her at the bar."

He gestured to the tender. "Whatever she wants." The medtech nodded her gratitude, and Den waved it away. "Just tell me something of interest. I've got this insatiable beast called the HoloNet News Service to appease."

"Not much to tell," the Durosian said. "Busy. Tables full, halls full, stacking 'em up outside."

"Old news, darlin'. Give me something juicy I can twirl a story out of."

"Well, there is one thing. Vondar is cutting on an enemy mercenary."

Den's ears swiveled forward. "Yeah?"

The Durosian lowered her voice. "And I don't think anybody's told him that his patient is the same guy who led the charge on our last camp -- the one that killed Doctor Yant."

Den blinked. "Milk me with a turbolaser. Hey, tell Big Nose your next three drinks are on me." He got up and moved back to his own table, turning this datum over and looking at it from all sides.

It was gossip, not news -- but it was a pretty amazing piece of gossip. He wouldn't want to be the patient under Doc Vondar's vibroblade when Jos found out he was operating on the very being responsible for the death of Zan Yant. The Seppie stood a better chance shaving a Wookiee, blindfolded and with a dull blade.

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Barriss wiped sweat from her face. Her robe was of an osmotic material, with a weave that allowed air circulation better than most clothing. It could be wrapped tighter for warmth in the winter, looser for more coolness in the summer, but when the temperature in the shade was hotter than a human's body, even being naked wasn't going to stop you from perspiring. You just had to put up with it.

As she walked through the medical ward, checking on various patients, she felt a disturbance in the Force. This in itself was hardly unusual -- in a room full of wounded and dying people, the swirls of energy were often erratic and labile. Impending death and chronic pain tended to heighten emotions, and such feelings marked the Force with their creation and passage.

But this was different. It was hard to pin down, but it seemed to be more familiar than some of the roiling sensations coming from the ward. When she focused on it, Barriss realized it was emanating from somebody whom she knew better than the transient patients. She narrowed her focus yet more, and suddenly she knew who it was.

Jos Vondar.

Again, this wasn't unusual. Not since Zan Yant's passing. One would think that doctors would be more inured to death than most but that was, in her experience, seldom the case. They fought against the final darkness daily -- sometimes winning, sometimes losing -- but when it came to friends or relatives, doctors were like everyone else. Knowing the enemy was not the same as embracing him.

Barriss frowned. Even so, something was odd here. This wasn't grief that she felt from Jos, who was only a short walk away, laboring in surgery. No, this was something else. Anger? Disgust? Something in between?

Whatever it was, he needed help. She could feel it.

Barriss moved toward the OT. Things were relatively quiet for the moment: she could take a few minutes to suss out what was causing the ripple she could still feel.

\* \* \*



"How's it coming?" Vaetes asked.

"No big surprises so far," Jos replied. Tolk mopped his forehead. Behind him, the Zabrak slept peacefully, his facial and body tattoos gleaming under the halogen lights. "I've removed the projectile shard from the CC nerve, and it looks like impulse conduction is still working peripherally, or at least grossly. He'll be able to pull a trigger just fine again, if he makes it. But it's going to take a while to get the plex surgery done."

"Can you stabilize him?"

blinked away a drop of sweat Tolk had missed that had rolled into his left eye. "Maybe. Why?"

"We have sixteen wounded who need surgery, and a couple who can't wait. If you can ice this patient and get back to him, we could use use your help."

Jos shrugged. "Cryo's always a risk. I thought this guy was a big deal."

"He is, but I'm not willing to let others die in his place. Stabilize him, Jos. We need you."

Jos nodded. The colonel moved away, getting quick status reports from other tables. Jos turned to the anesthetist and said, "Put him into cryo-cycle stasis and stack him somewhere."

"How long?"

"I don't know. The max. Four hours." If, after that long. Jos wasn't finished with his other patients, Colonel Omant might get freezer burn -- four hours was as long as a sentient was apt to stay stable in this setting.

As Jos was re-gloving and gowning, one of the field medics passed by in the hall, pushing another gurney. He paused in the doorway. "Hey. Doc, how'd the Zabrak scum do? Died in great pain, I hope?"

"He's in cryo-stasis," Jos said.

The medic, a Twi'Lek, shook his head, his lekku swinging with the motion. "You're a bigger man than I am, Doc. Seppie killed *my* friend, I guarantee my hand wouldn't be all that steady with a blade."

Jos frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't know? The Zabrak was head of the mercenary unit led the charge on our Rimsoo. Commander of the strike force of the bios and droids that was first to hit us."

The medic moved on, leaving Jos standing there in the hall, feeling like he'd just been jabbed with a full-strength force pike. Then rage roiled up in him, black and fierce. His hand tore through the glove he was putting on.

*Commander of the strike force of bios and droids that was first to hit us....*

The Sithspawn on the table whose life he'd been trying to save had been *directly* responsible for Zan's death!

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Barriss had no trouble finding Jos Vondar. The rage that boiled in him was a splotch of darkness in the operating theater; she could feel it, almost touch it.

As she approached, she saw Tolk emerge from the 'fresher, pulling on a clean surgical top. She moved to intercept her.

"Tolk. How's Jos doing?"

"Not so good." the nurse replied grimly. "But I guess you probably know that. He just spent two hours working on a Zabrak prisoner with some tricky conditions."

"I can see where working on a Zabrak -- particularly an enemy Zabrak -- might be difficult for him right now, but I'm feeling some serious rage coming from him. That can't be all of it."

"It's not. We just found out the Zabrak is the head of the mercenary unit that attacked us last week."

"I see," Barriss said. "What's the status of the patient now?"

"D'Arc ordered him iced until we can clear the backlog. As soon as things settle down, Jos is supposed to go back and finish patching him up."

Barriss nodded. "Prognosis?"

"Thirty, maybe forty percent chance of survival -- with a specialist in Zabrak neurosurgery. The slightest slipup at the wrong time could kill him. Jos is no expert -- plus he's exhausted and not fully sober. And in another two hours he's supposed to go back in and try to save the man who's responsible for his best friend's death."

Barriss shook her head in disbelief. "Under such circumstances, if the patient dies, nobody would blame Jos."

"Of course not. But I know him. Barriss. Even if he tries his best, if Omant dies, sooner or later Jos will look in the mirror and wonder if he did it on purpose. I don't think he'd be able to live with that. It would eat him up."

Barriss didn't say anything. This was a truly nasty situation; in fact, she couldn't think of a way it could be any worse. "Can you help him?" Tolk asked.

She sighed. "I can try."

\* \* \*

The medlifters finally stopped coming. Elbows-deep in a clone full of grenade fragments, Jos heard somebody say that the battle that produced the huge influx of wounded was finally over. The word was that the Separatists had lost half as many battledroids as the Republic had clones but that wasn't much consolation.

Jos looked around, spotted a circulating surgical tech, and beckoned him over. "Somebody better thaw Omant out," he told the tech, a female Ugnaught. "He's been cooling for almost the limit."

"Y'gonna have t' wake 'im up when he gets warm, y'know."

She was right. Zabraks had a weird resistance to anesthesia -- only a few kinds worked well on them, and the natural hardness of the species was such that they quickly developed resistance to those.

"Fine. Wake him up -- but keep the paralytic running."

"I got it, Doc."

Tolk started gluestatting and stapling the last patient shut. gestured at the circulating tech for new gloves and a gown. He wasn't looking forward to this.

Or was he? That was the big question, wasn't it?

\* \* \*

Barriss had finished her shift in the medical ward, and she went straight from there to the surgical theater. As a healer and a Jedi, she had abilities other doctors didn't; she could use the Force to soothe and repair injuries not easily treated with a drug or a blade. But there were limits. One of those limits lay in treating somebody against their will, or without their knowledge. It was one thing to go into the mind of a patient in a coma; another thing to adjust the thoughts of somebody who was awake and functioning. Yes, Jedi used the Force to sway weak minds, when the only other choice was to allow those beings to do grievous harm to themselves or others. But entering the strong mind of a surgeon working to save a dying patient was an entirely different situation.

*Assuming that Jos is trying to save the Zabrak. and not kill him.*

Reading that kind of intent was sometimes difficult. With all of the emotion roiling around in Jos' head, Barriss knew she could easily mistake his intent regarding Omant. He undoubtedly had mixed feelings, was seriously conflicted about it. And how you felt about a thing was not always how you acted upon it.

The halls were clearing out, and there weren't any wounded lined up outside the main OT when she got there. Barriss looked into the theater. The surgeons, surgical droids, nurses, techs, and orderlies bustled about, tending to the injured. She saw Jos as he stepped up to a new patient, and the Force told her it was yet another clone trooper, and not the Zabrak officer.

Which was just as well. There was another aspect to all this that she had to consider. If she brought the Force to bear on Jos while he was in the middle of a delicate procedure, she might very well cause him to make a

mistake. His was not a weak mind, and any conflict between his brain and hers could translate to neural misfiring, and in turn to a tremulous hand wielding the blade.

Tricky. Very tricky. She wished she could talk to her Master, to get her advice. But that wasn't going to happen, either.

\* \* \*

Jos stripped off his gloves. He was hardly able to manage that, he was so tired.

The fem Ugnaught tech cycled around. "Zabrak's awake, Doc. Got a mouth on 'im, dat one does."

Jos nodded wearily. "Where is he?"

"Pre-op."

\* \* \*

Sar Omant was lying under a thin sheet of repelfab, tracking Jos with his eyes as he was unable to turn his head. Nobody else was around. The monitoring casters stuck to the patient fed their data to a nursing station, and presumably somebody there was keeping track of the vital signs.

"Ah, Doctor Smoothskin," Omant greeted him with. "Why am I still alive?"

"That's a good question. I'm looking for an answer."

"Don't trouble yourself on my account."

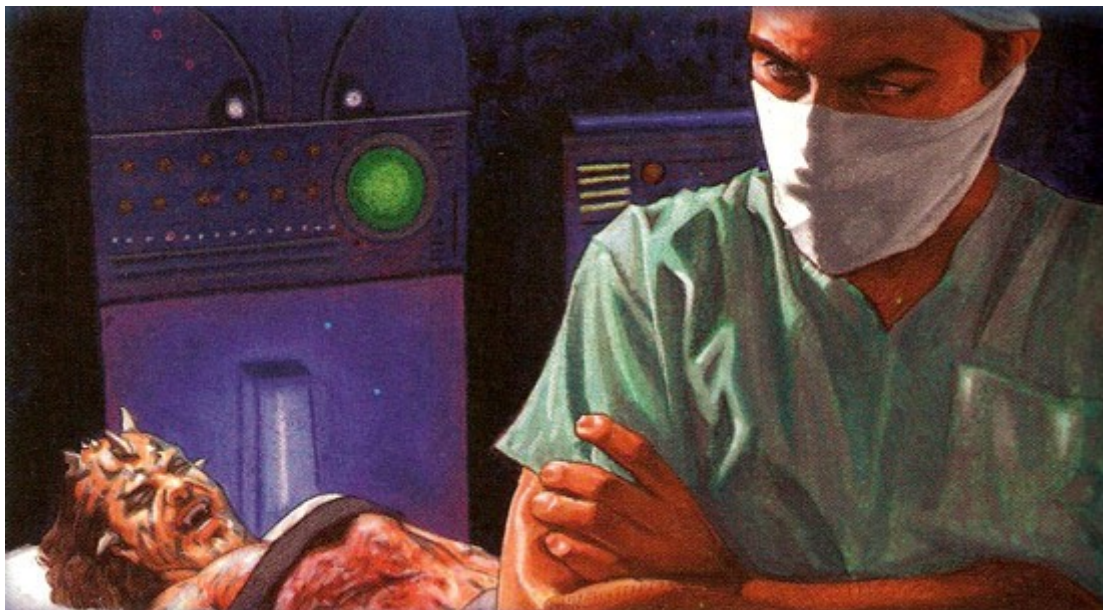
"We fixed a heart problem, took a slug fragment out of your spinal cord, and we're getting ready to pull another slug out of your substernal plex."

"Like I said, human, don't bother. Better dead than bled from the head."

Jos said, "My best friend on this backrocket planet was a Zabrak surgeon."

"Goes to show you how tolerant of lesser species we Zabraks are, doesn't it?"

His name was Zan Yant."



Even though Omant's facial muscles weren't working very well, Jos thought he saw a surprised expression flit across the other's features. "You know the name." It was not a question.

"Talusian, right? Music composer, plays the queterra," Omant said. "Not a classical fan myself, but he's pretty well-known on the homeworld. What about him?"

"He's dead," Jos said tonelessly. "You killed him."

Omant was watching him closely now. "Not impossible," he said. "I kill a lot of people. I don't remember dusting one of my own kind recently. Hey, you get busy, you miss things, right?"

Jos wanted to pick up something heavy and smash Sar Omant's horned head to a bloody mush. He wanted to hit him over and over again.

"It doesn't bother you?" he asked. "To kill a being of your own species?"

"It doesn't bother me to kill a being of *any* species, Smoothie. It's what I do. It's why we're all on this hot mudball, isn't it? It's a war -- haven't you noticed?"

They were alone in the chamber at the moment. Jos knew that all he had to do was put his hand on Sar Omant's shoulder, as if making a friendly, companionable gesture, and shake him. Not hard. A brief jerk or two would be all that was needed. He knew this. And he knew that Omant knew it too.

He reached out, put his hand lightly on the Zabrak's shoulder. For a long moment, both were very still. Then Jos said, "Rest up. You'll need it."

He turned and stalked out of the OT.

\* \* \*

Jos headed for the 'fresher, his surgical scrubs soaked with sweat. As he stepped in, he nearly ran into Klo Merit. The big Equani Minder was drying his hands under a blower. He looked up and smiled. The Equani was, as Zan had once described him, as big as a Wampa with a thyroid problem. His eyes were large and stereoptican, and his mouth wide and filled with two rows of teeth. Equani were definitely predators, and Jos imagined they probably looked pretty fearsome to anyone coming upon one for the first time. Knowing as he did the gentle soul beneath the fearsome exterior, however. Jos found it hard to think of Merit as anything but a benign professional therapist

He raised a hand in greeting. "Klo."

"Jos. How are you doing?"

"Me? Oh, fine. Relaxed, enjoying another beautiful day on scenic Drongar, fun capital of the galaxy. How's about you?"

"I just came from post-op."

Jos nodded. The Minder would have been busy, calming the spirits of those who were gravely wounded or dying. Jos didn't envy him that job. He started to strip off his sodden clothes.

Merit asked, "You done for the day?"

"Got one more surgery." Jos activated the unit. "They're prepping him now." He started disrobing, then stopped and looked at the Minder.

"You ever have to work on patients you don't like?" he asked. "Heal somebody who grates on you, someone you actively hate?"

"Now and then, yes."

"How do you handle it?"

Merit shrugged, the short fur on his shoulders and back rippling with the movement. "We all have to do things we don't enjoy. We all find ourselves in situations where our actions aren't those we'd prefer. But when you sign on to do a job, you don't always get to choose -- it's the nature of the work. When you can't live with a choice, you walk away."

"What if you can't walk away?"

Merit leaned against the plasteel wall. "Care to get more specific?"

Jos stood staring into the shower. He watched the water pool on the floor and spiral down the drain. "My patient is responsible for the attack that killed Zan. He has no regrets about it; he's a mercenary. He's also an

obnoxious milking mopak I wouldn't cross the street to spit on if he was on fire -- and I'm the only guy here qualified to save his life. And at best, the odds are against him, even if I don't make a mistake."

Merit didn't speak for a moment. "That's a hard one."

Jos laughed, and the sound danced on the edge of hysteria. "Got to hand it to you Minders, you don't miss a thing."

Merit sighed. "Nobody around here has all the answers, Jos, not even our neighborhood Jedi. You want to punish this patient for what he did. You'd like to see him suffer and die."

"Oh, yeah." Jos hesitated, then added, "Just after Zan died, while we were still on the transport, I swore to myself that I would do something that would change things, somehow. I was concussed and barely conscious, couldn't even stand up, but I remember deciding that I had to avenge Zan, to make his death not quite so meaningless."

"And now a golden opportunity has presented itself. The supreme irony -- the very being who was directly responsible for Zan's death turns up under your knife. 'What are the odds? How can it be anything else but fate?' you ask yourself."

"Yes."

Merit nodded. "Understandable. But now ask yourself this: if you'd died in that attack and it was Zan about to operate on the being responsible, what do you think he would do?"

Jos shook his head. "I don't know."

"I think you do. If you're looking for justice, Jos, finding it in a war is never going to be easy. People do things that are horrible and despicable. But if they survive, when the war is over, they have to look back on those actions and figure out a way to rationalize what they did. Ask yourself this: ten years from now, while you're in practice on your homeworld treating civilian patients, then going home to see your spouse and children, how will you feel about the choice you made with this patient? If your son or daughter asks you what you did in the war, what will you tell them?"

\* \* \*

Cleaner and slightly refreshed from his shower, Jos stood waiting as a droid orderly gurneyed the patient in and transferred him to the table. Activity had died down, there were only a couple of surgeons still slicing, but Jos was aware that those who weren't working were watching him. Barriss Offee stood a few meters away, masked and gowned. also watching.

The Zabrak was still awake. They wouldn't knock him out until the last moment, to keep him from staying under any longer than necessary. He gave Jos a baleful glare.

"Doctor Smoothskin. Long time no see. Any messages you want me to deliver to your friend when I get to the other side?"

Jos ignored him. He turned to the anesthetist. "Knock him out," he said.

Sar Omant was laughing when the anesthetic took him down. Vaetes drifted over. "Listen, Jos. If this guy doesn't make it, nobody will blame you. Not that I'm saying you should--"

Jos nodded. "I know what you mean, D'Arc. Thanks."

"Just do your best." Vaetes moved off.

"Doctor," the anesthetist said, "he's going into Rhees-Verk."

"Back off on the effitol drip a quarter, start an infusion of neurodan, five milligrams." Rhees-Verk breathing, a kind of syncopated rhythm, often led to ventricular fibrillation.

After a moment, the anesthetist said, "Still laboring."

*Blast*, Jos thought. "Let's get him on cardioresperatory, stat--"

"Wait. hold on. He's stabilizing." The anesthetist's voice was astonished. "I don't know how or why, but he's steady again."

"Let's not stop to wonder why," Jos said. "Stations, everyone. We're going in."

\* \* \*

Barriss Offee, wrapped in the Force, was working hard to keep the injured Zabrak's breathing regulated. It took all her concentration, and if she slacked off, she knew his primary heart would start to vibrate so fast it wouldn't be able to pump blood -- and the Zabrak would most likely crash before the sub-heart could take over. She could hold him stable, this she knew, but she couldn't spare any energy for Jos. Whatever decision he was going to make about the patient, however he was going to deal with his personal demons, he was going to have to do it without any help from the Force.

\* \* \*

"Number eighteen vibroblade," Jos said.

Tolk slapped the handle into his palm. "Eighteen vibroblade."

"Making the incision -- okay. Retract and get a pressor on it."

Jos paused, looking down at the patient. A small area just below the sternum was being held open by pressor fields, exposing the rosy strata of the plex. Within its folds he could glimpse the dull gray of the slug lodged there. He looked at Sar Omant's face. Even unconscious, the Zabrak's expression was hard, unforgiving. The face of a killer.



What would Zan Yant, a kind and gentle being who had been a doctor, a musician, and a good friend, do if it were him cutting?

What was the best way for Jos to serve his friend's memory? What was the best way for him to serve his own future? What was the only way to help, however infinitesimally, begin the healing process that must eventually encompass the galaxy?

He remembered then, for some reason, listening to a piece Zan had been playing a couple of months earlier, in their kiosk. Short, and consisting mostly of one or two single, quavering notes. An intermezzo, he'd called it. A moment between movements, a held breath, a pause before plunging back into the music that was life. "What happens in these moments, these interstitial beats," he'd told Jos, "are as important as the main pieces themselves. Because it's in those moments between where we gain clarity. Where we suddenly know what the next movement is really all about."

"Forceps," he murmured to Tolk. She handed them to him, and he could see that she was smiling under her mask.

As was he.